

## CHAPTER 9

# TWO REVOLUTIONARY BROTHERS

## THE GRACCHI AND THE DECLINE OF THE REPUBLIC

66 PLUTARCH AND SALLUST

Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus were two Roman brothers who fought and died for the same cause. They even died the same way, murdered in violent street brawls. But the two Gracchi were very different in age and personality. Plutarch, the Greek writer who brought so many Romans

to life through his biographies, describes them:

"Tiberius, in his looks . . .

and gestures . . . was gentle

and composed. But Gaius was

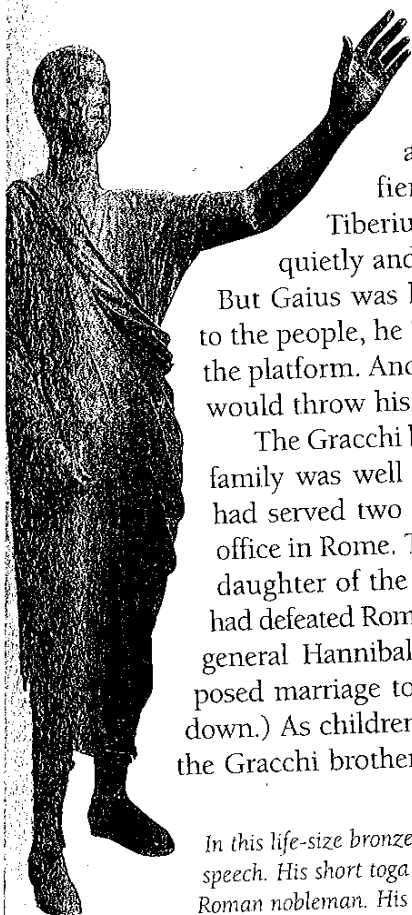
fiery and passionate." When

Tiberius gave a speech, he spoke quietly and never moved from one spot.

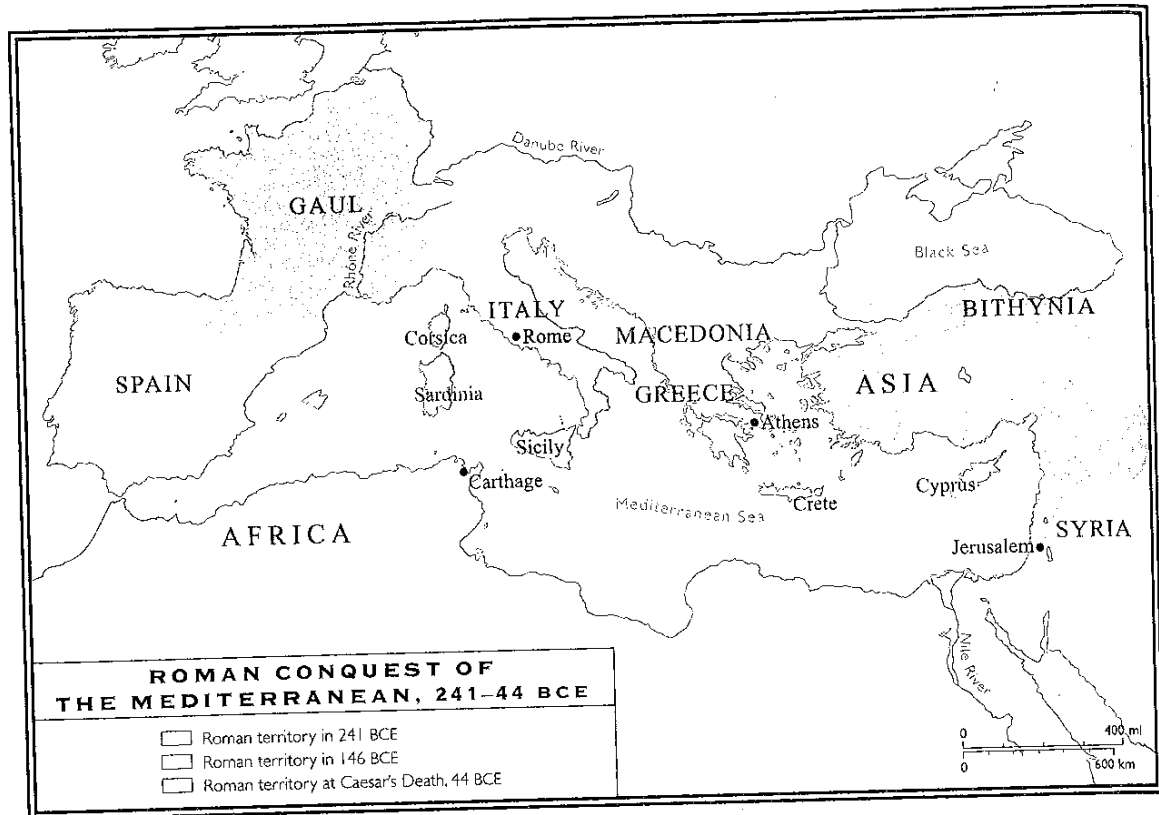
But Gaius was like an actor. When he spoke to the people, he "would walk about, pacing on the platform. And in the heat of his orations, he would throw his cloak from his shoulders."

The Gracchi brothers were noblemen whose family was well known in Rome. Their father had served two terms as a consul, the highest office in Rome. Their mother, Cornelia, was the daughter of the general Scipio Africanus, who had defeated Rome's great enemy, the Carthaginian general Hannibal. (A king of Egypt once proposed marriage to Cornelia, but she turned him down.) As children of such distinguished parents, the Gracchi brothers had not only social rank but

66 Plutarch, *Life of Tiberius Gracchus*, 110 CE



In this life-size bronze statue, orator Aulus Metellus gives a speech. His short toga and high-laced shoes tell us that he is a Roman nobleman. His name is on the hem of his toga.



also plenty of money. Still, they devoted themselves to improving the lives of the poor.

Tiberius and Gaius entered politics in difficult times. The Roman Republic was in trouble. Like a teenager who grows tall "overnight," Rome had grown dramatically during the Punic Wars, from 264 to 146 BCE. And although 118 years is a long time for a person, it's a very short time for a city or empire. Rome entered the war years as a small city-state. It ended them as the ruler of the Mediterranean, controlling all of Italy, with conquered lands stretching from Africa and Spain to Greece. The once-poor farming community had mushroomed into a giant whose military conquests poured masses of gold, grain, and slaves into Italy.

Rome was suddenly rich and powerful. But it was also suddenly full of problems. Thousands of unemployed men hung around on the streets of the city, hoping to find work.

Many had lost their jobs to foreign slaves, who didn't have to be paid for their labor. Others in the street crowds were poor farmers whose land had been bought by wealthy aristocrats. These men could no longer farm. They couldn't join the army, either—only men who owned land could become soldiers. So what could they do? How could they feed themselves and their families?

Rome's elected officials didn't do much to improve the situation. More and more, they concentrated on what would be best for them instead of thinking about the common good. Instead of asking how they could help Rome and its people, they looked for ways to gain money and **importance** for themselves. Many fought their way to the top through bribery and corruption. Writing in the first century BCE, Sallust—a historian and a senator—describes his country's crisis: "Our country had grown great through hard work and the practice of justice . . . but then greed destroyed honor, integrity, and all other noble qualities; and in their place came . . . cruelty, neglect of the gods, and a belief that everything has a price."

The army became unruly. Rebellious mobs roamed the city. Yet the Senate ignored these problems and tried to govern the sprawling empire as if it were still a small city-state. Rome's leaders seemed to be asking for trouble, and they got it. Trouble's name was Tiberius Gracchus, the older of the two Gracchi brothers.

Tiberius was elected a tribune of the people in 133 BCE. This office was first established to protect the plebeians, but later tribunes used it to advance their own careers. And as soon as Tiberius took office, he set to work for the rights of the plebs. The aristocrats in the Senate claimed that he was interested only in his own glory, but Tiberius denied it. He said that a trip through northern Italy had showed him how desperate the peasants really were. "The men who fight and die for Italy have only air and light. Without house or home, they wander with their wives and children in the open air. . . . They fight and die for the luxury and riches of others." Tiberius insisted that Rome should give the land it gained through war to the poor. Conquered territory

"Important" and "importance" come from the Latin word *importare*, which means to bring in. Imagine a messenger, running to *bring in* urgent news of a victory on the battlefield or word of an illness, death, or birth.

[66] Sallust, *Catiline*, 42 BCE

[66] Plutarch, *Life of Tiberius Gracchus*, 110 CE

became state land. Technically, it belonged to Rome, but if wealthy citizens paid a small tax, they were allowed to farm it as their own. In this way most of the conquered territory passed into the hands of those who needed it least—the rich. Some aristocrats, including many senators, got tens of thousands of acres in this way. They used slave labor to work the land and made huge profits.

Tiberius made up his mind to change this law. He proposed that no one—no matter who his ancestors were—should be allowed to keep more than 300 acres of state land. The rest should be given to the poor. Once the homeless had land, he reasoned, they would be able to support themselves. They would no longer roam the cities in angry, hungry mobs. And, as landowners, they would be eligible to serve in the army. This would help the people, help the army, and help Rome—a “win” for everyone. But most of the senators stood against Tiberius, and it’s easy to see why. His proposed law would rob them of the huge profits that they had enjoyed for so long.

Knowing that he had very little support among the senators, Tiberius bypassed the Senate and took his proposal directly to the Assembly of the Plebs. He needed votes for his plan to become law, so he arranged for peasants to be brought in from the countryside to increase the number of votes in his favor. When another tribune, Octavius, tried to use his veto to stop the vote, Tiberius called for the Assembly to throw him out. According to Plutarch, one of Tiberius’s servants dragged Octavius away. Luckily for Octavius, his rich pals rescued him from the angry mob.

With Octavius out of the way, the Assembly voted Tiberius’s proposal into law. The senators tried desperately to block the actual transfer of land. They knew that it would involve a mass of paperwork, which is always expensive. All of the new farmers would need animals and tools. The total cost would be enormous. So the Senate refused to cover expenses. That way, the hated law would be harmless—like a tiger without teeth. But Tiberius outsmarted them. He arranged to pay for the land transfers using money from a foreign kingdom.

Opinion in Rome was split. The way Tiberius had fought for his land reform, as much as the law itself, **infuriated** the senators. Tiberius had ignored the fact that the Senate was supposed to control Rome's finances. No wonder the noblemen hated him! But he became the common people's hero. This really worried the senators. They didn't want anyone to become too popular, especially with the plebs. When Tiberius began to walk through Rome accompanied by bodyguards, the senators feared the worst. They thought he planned to take over the government by force and rule on his own, tossing aside written laws and crippling the Senate's power.

*furia* = "rage"  
 "Infuriate" means to cause  
 fury—to make someone angry.

No Roman official could be brought to trial while still in office. Tiberius's enemies planned to attack him as soon as his term ended. But he shocked them by announcing his plan to run for re-election. This wasn't supposed to happen. Tribunes were supposed to serve for one year only. Many aristocrats believed that the plebs would soon proclaim Tiberius king. Would a tyrant once again rule Rome?

A brawl broke out in the election assembly and Tiberius was killed in the street fighting that followed. For the first time in centuries, violence had entered Roman politics, and there it stayed until the fall of the Republic.

Tiberius had challenged the power of the Senate and won—even though he died in the process. His land reform had become law. A committee soon set to work distributing state-owned lands to the poor. Tiberius's brother Gaius was a member of that committee. In 123 BCE—ten years after Tiberius's death—Gaius followed in his brother's footsteps and was elected tribune.

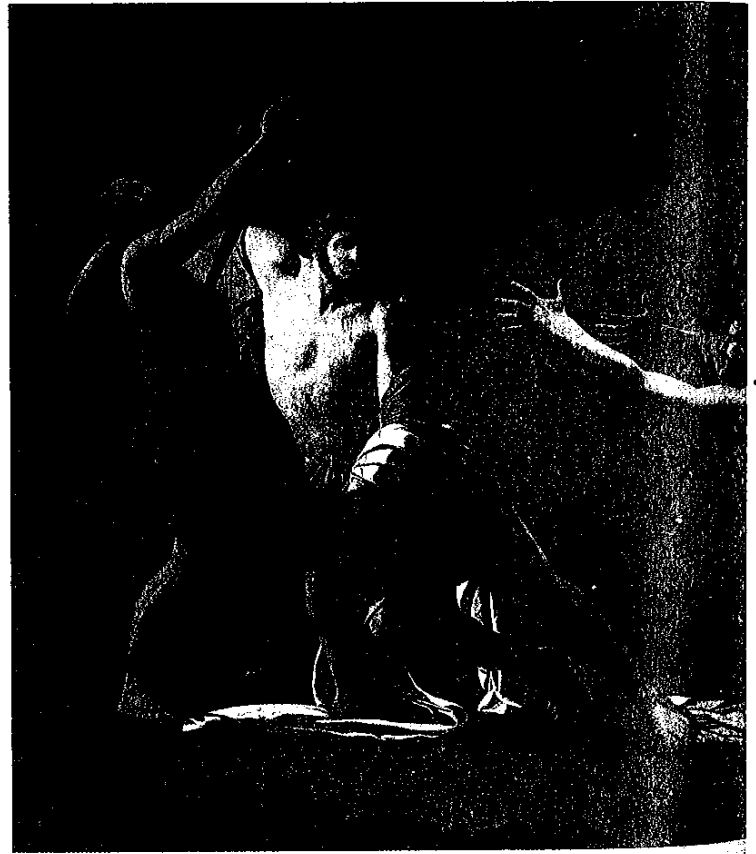
Gaius was a true **revolutionary**, even more than Tiberius had been. The younger Gracchus was a great orator, and he pushed through some important reforms. His grain law, for example, kept the price of grain low enough that ordinary citizens could afford to buy bread for their families.

Like his brother, Gaius fought against the power of the nobles. He changed the jury system so that when senators were tried in the courts for corruption, the jury would include some men who weren't members of the Senate. This change made it harder for corrupt senators to get away with their

"Revolutionary" comes from the word *revolvere*, which means to revolve, to turn or roll back. The revolutionary Gracchi brothers tried to turn things around . . . turn the world upside down.

crimes. Although Gaius was re-elected, opposition to him grew among Rome's nobility. And like Tiberius, Gaius met his death in a street battle during his second term in office.

Gaius had fought for the rights of Rome's Italian allies, saying that they deserved citizenship. The allies agreed. They had helped Rome to conquer the Mediterranean and yet they didn't have the rights that Roman citizens enjoyed. In 90 BCE, more than thirty years after Gaius's death, Rome's Italian allies rebelled. (This revolution is usually called the Social War, but its other name, the War of the Allies, describes it better.) The non-Roman Italians established their own capital and issued coins showing the Italian bull goring the Roman wolf. The war came to an end when Rome granted citizenship to all free, male inhabitants of Italy.



*Gaius Gracchus meets his death in this 18th-century painting. There was no police force to control the mobs who fought in the streets of Rome.*

Although the Gracchi brothers had made some progress toward their goals, neither had solved the problems of the poor. Much of the distributed land was soon bought up by the wealthy. The poor lost ground, sliding back to where they had been before the reforms. When the Gracchi's reforms failed, the poor people of Rome became even more dissatisfied. It was as though the taste of hope had made them impatient for the feast they believed should be theirs. In the years that followed the deaths of the Gracchi, a new group of politicians appeared in Rome: the *populares*. Like Tiberius and Gaius, the *populares* spoke for the common people. These politicians played an important role in the conflicts that ended the Roman Republic.

*populus* = "people"  
The *populares* were politicians who championed the common folk of Rome—the *populus Romanus*.

